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Another ax falls at Donaldson

THE ISSUE *The health care administrator at Donaldson prison was fired for not doing a good enough job. But will her successor do better if the warnings about inadequate staff aren't heeded?*

If the story has a familiar ring to it, there's a good reason. Stephanie Lawson isn't the first official at Donaldson Correctional Facility to be shown the door after complaining about prison staffing conditions. Lawson, a registered nurse who works for the private company that provides prison health services, was fired for failing to improve medical care at Donaldson. But her dismissal came after she repeatedly complained that she couldn't do her job because of staffing shortages, particularly the lack of a full-time doctor.

Earlier this month, Donaldson Warden Stephen Bullard was placed on mandatory leave after complaining that his guards are working so much overtime they are getting stressed out and sick. "I am concerned that it is going to take a lawsuit, riot, death or serious injury to take this crisis seriously," he wrote to prison Commissioner Donal Campbell.

The Department of Corrections said the mandatory leave was for the stressed warden's own good. How comforting.

E.J. "Mac" McArthur, head of the Alabama State Employees Association,

said the department wants Bullard to have a psychiatric exam. Frankly, we'd be more concerned about Bullard's mental health if conditions at Donaldson didn't stress him to the max.

Of course, none of this should be interpreted as suggesting prisons don't need accountable leadership. If prison officials are not effective or if they're burned out, that doesn't benefit inmates or taxpayers. But the problem at Donaldson is bigger than Bullard and Lawson. Indeed, the problem is bigger than Donaldson, too.

Across the board, Alabama's prison system is set up for failure. The blame doesn't rest with the people who run the prisons on a day-to-day basis. The real blame goes back to the state legislators who write the laws and control the purse strings.

When it comes to prisons, you can be long on punishment, or you can be short on cash, but you can't be both. That doesn't mean Alabama hasn't kept trying, with disastrous results.

Bullard's and Lawson's complaints are just tiny symptoms of a disease plaguing the Department of Corrections. Relieving them of their duties is no cure.